

Chapter V: Merced Wild and Scenic River

Introduction

In 1987, the U.S. Congress designated the Merced River a Wild and Scenic River to protect its free-flowing condition and to protect and enhance its unique values for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations (16 United States Code 1271). This designation gives the Merced River special protection under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act and requires the managing agencies to prepare a comprehensive management plan for the river and its immediate environment.

After reaching a Record of Decision on the final environmental impact statement, the National Park Service released the *Merced Wild and Scenic River Comprehensive Management Plan* (referred to hereafter as the Merced River Plan) in February 2001, which outlines how the Merced Wild and Scenic River corridor will be managed. The Merced River Plan applies seven management elements to prescribe desired future conditions, typical visitor activities and experiences, and park facilities and management activities allowed in the river corridor. The management elements include boundaries, classifications, Outstandingly Remarkable Values, the Wild and Scenic River Act Section 7 determination process, the River Protection Overlay, management zoning, and the Visitor Experience and Resource Protection framework.

The National Park Service uses the management elements as a set of decision-making criteria with which to evaluate projects in the Merced Wild and Scenic River corridor, such as the Cascades Diversion Dam Removal Project. This chapter evaluates the consistency of the proposed action with the management elements of the Merced River Plan. An overview of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act and of the Merced River Plan and its management elements may be found in the Merced River Plan (incorporated by reference) (NPS 2001a).

This chapter summarizes the consistency analysis with the Merced River Plan, including the findings of the Cascades Diversion Dam Project Wild and Scenic River Act Section 7 Determination, which is included in Appendix B, Merced Wild and Scenic River Section 7 Determination.

Consistency with Management Elements of the Merced River Plan

Relationship to the Boundary

The proposed action would occur within the Merced Wild and Scenic River boundary in Segment 3A, Impoundment.

Classification Compatibility

The river segment at the dam from the top of the pool to 200 feet below the dam is classified as recreational, due to the human-made impoundment at the site. The river segments upstream and downstream of the dam are classified as scenic, a designation reserved for sections of rivers that

are “free of impoundments, with shorelines or watersheds still largely primitive and shorelines largely undeveloped, but accessible in places by roads.” Upon implementation of the proposed action, the river segment through the dam site would be restored to a free-flowing state, near natural conditions. It would then be reclassified as scenic, as is called for in the Merced River Plan. The proposed action would reduce the aggregate amount and type of shoreline development. As a result, the proposed action is compatible with the resultant scenic classification.

Changing the classification from recreation to scenic would not affect visitor experience, natural, cultural, or social resources, or the associated Outstandingly Remarkable Values. Changing the classification is a technical adjustment consistent with the post-project site conditions, which will be “free of impoundments, with shorelines or watersheds still largely primitive and shorelines largely undeveloped, but accessible in places by roads.”

Outstandingly Remarkable Values

The proposed action would remove Cascades Diversion Dam and attendant structures, restoring the free-flowing condition of the Merced Wild and Scenic River and returning this portion of the river to a more natural state, thereby enhancing its integrity. Table B-2 (see Appendix B, Merced Wild and Scenic River Section 7 Determination) describes the effects of the proposed action on each of the Outstandingly Remarkable Values that apply to the Impoundment, Gorge, and El Portal river segments. As indicated in Table B-1, the proposed action would have a beneficial effect on the biological and hydrologic processes Outstandingly Remarkable Values. The proposed action would not result in any changes to the current level of protection and enhancement of the scientific, scenic, geologic processes, recreation, or cultural Outstandingly Remarkable Values. As a result, implementation of the proposed action would allow the National Park Service to protect and enhance the river’s Outstandingly Remarkable Values.

Wild and Scenic Rivers Act Section 7 Determination Process

Pursuant to the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, the National Park Service must carry out a Section 7 determination on all proposed water resources projects to ensure that they do not affect free flow and do not directly and adversely impact the Outstandingly Remarkable Values for which the river was designated. The proposed action would remove a human-made structure from the bed and banks of the Merced Wild and Scenic River. Free-flow and natural fluvial processes (e.g., sediment transport, fish passage) would be returned to a more natural condition. Upon dam removal, the channel of the Merced Wild and Scenic River would naturally narrow and deepen. The floodplain in the immediate vicinity of the impoundment would be enlarged and stabilized. Riparian and floodplain extent, functions, and values would be enhanced. The proposed action would have a beneficial effect on the biological and hydrologic processes Outstandingly Remarkable Values. The proposed action would not result in any changes to the current level of protection and enhancement of the scientific, scenic, geologic process, recreation, and cultural Outstandingly Remarkable Values. The National Park Service concludes that the proposed action would enhance free flow of the Merced Wild and Scenic River and would protect the Outstandingly Remarkable Values for which the river was designated Wild and Scenic. For additional detail, refer to Appendix B, Merced Wild and Scenic River Section 7 Determination.

River Protection Overlay

The proposed action would remove a human-made structure from the bed and banks of the Merced Wild and Scenic River. Free-flow and natural fluvial processes would be returned to more natural conditions. One of the purposes of the River Protection Overlay is to protect and restore hydrologic processes within the river corridor. In the vicinity of Cascades Diversion Dam, the River Protection Overlay includes the Merced Wild and Scenic River channel itself, and extends 150 feet on both sides of the river, measured from the ordinary high-water mark. Presence of a nonessential facility within the River Protection Overlay is inconsistent with the River Protection Overlay purpose described above. Removal of the dam from the River Protection Overlay would rectify this inconsistency.

The proposed action is consistent with this management element of the Merced River Plan.

Management Zoning

The management zones applicable to the Cascades Diversion Dam Removal Project include:

- Discovery (2B) north of the river in the Impoundment segment
- Open Space (2A) south of the river in the Impoundment segment

The dam itself is located in management zones 2A and 2B. The Open Space (2A) zone allows for relatively undisturbed natural areas that receive only incidental or casual use, while the Discovery (2B) zone is characterized by relatively quiet natural areas, where visitor encounters are low to moderate. Because the proposed action would remove a human-made structure from the bed and banks of the Merced Wild and Scenic River and return this segment of the river to more natural conditions, the proposed action is consistent with this management element of the Merced River Plan.

Visitor Experience and Resource Protection Compatibility

The proposed action does not include any actions that would be inconsistent with the interim Visitor Experience and Resource Protection framework.